AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Jane Eisner, author of the new book, *Carole King: She Made the Earth Move*. So for anyone who may not be familiar with her, could you introduce us to the life and work of Carol King?

JE: Carole King is really arguably one of the greatest singer-songwriter,composers in the 20th century. She had very humble beginnings. She grew up in a working class neighborhood in Brooklyn, surrounded by people like her, striving working-class children and grandchildren of immigrants. Her father was a firefighter for the New York City Department of Aging. She grew up very modestly, as I mentioned, but there was always a piano around. Her mother knew how to play, really always wanted to perform herself, and taught young Carole to start playing the piano when she was four years old and couldn't reach the keyboard. So they had to put what we used to call telephone books on the bench so that she could reach. And this love of music and especially of piano really just continued. Her mother would take her to Broadway shows. She really became enamored of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein. And yet at the same time, there was this beginnings of rock and roll and a real teen culture of music. And the high school that she went to, James Madison High School, large public high school, still around, excellent, really had a focus on music. There was a competition every year among the grades called Sing, and each grade would kind of craft their own play or performance or whatever, and then present it to the whole student body and they'd vote. And each of the three years that she was involved, 10th, 11th, 12th grade, her grade won. So it's very validating. She talks in her memoir about wanting to be like the pretty girls and wanting to have that kind of popular role in school. But that wasn't going to happen to her. She wasn't conventionally pretty. She was young, very young for her age. She was among a small group of students who skipped two grades. She was already short. But the piano and music gave her a position in school. It gave her an identity. And so I think that was really important to her from an early age.

AT: And so I freely admit that I'm not a musician or music scholar. So could you help me understand the impact that she would go on to have on American music?

JE: Sure. It comes in two big stages. So in the early years of her trying to write and sell music, she was part of what we call the Brill Building Era. It's an era that takes its name from an actual building near Times Square called the Brill Building. You can see the little plaque there now still, and actually another building a couple of blocks away. And those buildings were this center of creation of popular music. I mentioned this growing teen culture in the late 1950s, early 1960s. It wasn't a long era. It was unbelievably creatively productive. So the way it worked then is like a factory. One person composed the music, another person wrote the lyrics, another person produced the music and tried to sell it. Another person performed it. It was very atomized. And that's how she started out. She started working there with her first husband, whom she married at a very young age. They met at Queens College. She soon became pregnant. They got married, had their baby and just were working all the time to try to compose and write songs that they could sell. And they had a really, really unusual partnership. It was kind of magical for the years that that it lasted. Unfortunately, their marriage broke up. But in those years, they created amazing songs and they had this chemistry between them. She would compose and he would write or maybe he would write and she would compose or maybe they do it together. And a lot of this took place, if not in their home, then at the Brill Building. And they were part of this community. All these other pairs, Bert Bacharach and Hal David, Barry Mann and Cynthia Weil, they were all creating these amazing songs. And there was a lot of collaboration. I'm told the walls were very thin. You could hear the pair in the next room trying to create something. It was also pretty competitive because they all wanted to sell their songs. It trained her, I think. It trained her to work hard, to work fast and to have a sense of what was needed there. So some of her early songs, even though they seem kind of sweet and yearning, they also reflected a growing acceptance of women's sexuality. So you think of a song like Will You Love Me Tomorrow, which you wrote with Gerry Goffin, and that was their first big, big hit. It expressed this questioning that a woman had after an evening of romance. What will the morning bring? Will he love me then? And even the suggestion that there

was something that happened to them sexually during the night. That was a new thing then. I don't think they meant to, but they were quietly kind of breaking down the barriers in the society around them that hid a lot of these things. They weren't revolutionaries, they weren't on the streets protesting. But I do think that they had a sense of what the culture was maybe ready for.

AT: It's interesting that you describe her as not being a revolutionary or radical or anything like that, because you talk about how she struggled to reconcile her fame with being a wife and a mother and moved to rural Idaho, as you do. She later emerged as a political activist. I find it interesting that you're talking about how she was doing something that was subtly revolutionary, shall we say, and then later became more outspoken.

JE:You're right. And she was somebody who broke the barriers by doing. She wasn't big on proclamations, but from the very beginning, when she started to have some success as a songwriter, especially after she left New York, went to California, was part of the scene in Laurel Canyon. This also amazing moment where a lot of singer-songwriters were living and sharing their music, sometimes getting involved with one another. But the other people who were there around her, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, Graham Nash, it was kind of amazing. So even then, she's writing these songs. There were other women there. None of them were mothers, and she ended up having four children, two by her first husband and two by her second husband. So there was always this dynamic about that. And yet while she had that in her private life, she was very domesticated. People, I'm sure, know what the cover of the Tapestry album looks like. They may not know that she's sitting on a windowsill and the curtains above the windowsill, she made. She was like that. But what she did was also break barriers again by doing. So they're recording in the studio and it's usually only other men there. And she was the one in charge. Everybody knew it. She didn't have to proclaim. She just did it. Gloria Steinem said she was the first woman to have a downbeat. In other words, she was the first woman to say, “OK, we're going to do this song right now.” I think her feminism came through again, not so much in what she said, but what she did.
The move to rural Idaho that you mentioned. So she's divorced her second husband. She immediately falls in love with this guy named Rick Evers, who was a real, real troubling character, persuades her to move to Idaho with her two youngest children. He was a very difficult man, physically abused her even before they married. And after, still, she stayed with him. And she's talked about this and the scourge of domestic violence, how difficult it is to leave. And he eventually died of a drug overdose. But she just became enamored of that landscape, of that living and ended up marrying another man, her fourth husband, also named Rick. And they moved to really, really the wilderness for a time off the grid. And you could look at that in all different ways. You could say that she was fleeing fame and the spotlight. She wanted nothing to do with the scene in New York or in California. And I think that was part of it. You could also say that this was a kind of feminist statement again, without being a statement. She just wanted to live her life differently. Even then, though, she had the beginnings of a political awareness. So she was a supporter of Gary Hart, who made an unsuccessful bid for president in 1984. She did so in large part because of his caring about the environment, which at that point was somewhat novel. And if you look at a through line through her political activism, yes, she trends towards the Democratic Party and supported various presidential candidates. But her issue-oriented activism was really environmental and in particular for preservation of the Rockies. And that, to this day, is still something that she really cares about. She's testified before Congress. She's written some op-eds. And that, I think, directly came from her experience in Idaho, falling in love with that part of the United States and wanting to preserve it.

AT: So one of the things that you've said before is that when you tried to play some of the songs, they were far more complex than you expected. And so on a musicality level, could you explain that? Because a lot of people might listen to these songs and think, “oh, that sounds pretty simple” without realizing what's going on sort of under the surface.

JE: Yes. Well, honestly, I was that way, too. I didn't think of simple as a derogatory statement so much as catchy, the kinds of things that you could easily remember. Will You Love Me Tomorrow and Up on the Roof, they had these wonderful melodies and great lyrics from Gerry Goffin. But what I didn't appreciate, and to me, in some cases, this is really the biggest revelation I had in doing the research for this book, is once I sat down to actually play these songs and then, because I couldn't, taking piano lessons to help me play them, I just realized their complexity, not every single one, but a real lot. And some of it is subtle, like the way You've Got a Friend moves from the minor key when she's first describing the problem, “when you're down and troubled,” and then moves to the major key when she says, “you just call out my name.” And perhaps people with a much better ear than I would have known that anyhow. But for me, as someone who must have sang that song a thousand times, it just didn't occur to me. So part of what's going on is there's a term of text painting, so she's kind of using musical painting. She's using the music underneath the melody to signal something, to create a mood, to amplify what's going on in the lyrics.
And sometimes it's more complex. She loves chords. She talks about that. “I love chords.” And again, before I did this research, I thought, OK, there's melody and chords. Right hand on a piano usually plays the melody, left hand usually plays the chords. So I thought that it was just this binary. Piano actually is an unusual instrument because most instruments you can't do two things. You play the flute and it's one line of music. Piano is different. One hand does one, one hand does the other. But actually, especially when she would perform and sing the melodies, then she was creating that underline underneath the melody, sometimes with two hands playing around with song structure, playing around with chords. For anyone who knows music, there's a major arpeggio in the chord of C major, simplest chord, all white keys. It's C, E, G, C. And there's a known variation of that called the C7. So it would be C, E, G, and then B instead of C. But she added this whole other thing. She would play around and add other notes to those chords, sometimes with just one hand, sometimes with two. And what that did was subtly, like maybe you don't even realize it, but it adds a whole other dimension to the music. And then when you go to try to play it, you realize even how much harder it is. So, for example, one of her signature songs is Beautiful. The musical on Broadway is called Beautiful: The Carole King Musical. So there are a lot of things about that song that I never quite understood. And one of them is how complex that music is. I really had trouble playing that. Now, I'm not a great piano player, but still, even on the tutelage of my piano teacher, I had trouble playing that. And so I think that was one of her great contributions to making her music original.

AT: I feel like there's a corollary here with what you were saying earlier about being sort of quietly revolutionary is that on the surface, there's one thing, but then if you dig a little bit deeper, there's a lot more going on.

JE: Yes. Yeah. And look, she's not the only musician, especially the only musician of her time. You think about somebody like Joni Mitchell, who's operating on five different levels. But the difference with Carole King is that her music was quite acceptable. It's really hard to sing Joni Mitchell songs. It's not hard at all to sing a real lot of Carole King songs.

AT: Do you think that's part of why audiences today are still connecting with her music?

JE: Absolutely. I think because she loved melody so much, I think as humans, we're prone to love melodies. You think about the melodies that you heard as a newborn or infant or that you sang to another infant. But I also think besides the melody and the originality of her music, which still seems original today, to me, the more I think about it, I have come to the conclusion that her popularity is really also dependent on the feelings that she expresses in these songs. At the time, if not revolutionary, they were new for a woman to, say, express her own sexuality, as she does in You Made the Earth Move, to express the tentativeness of romance, like in Will You Love Me Tomorrow, to express every kind of emotion in You Made Me Feel Like a Natural Woman. And it's not just about women's feelings, but even more general feelings. The desire to have a friend and really care

about friendships. The feeling you have when you're far away from your loved ones, like in So Far Away. One of my favorites really is Up on the Roof. It's just a gorgeous song. And it's interesting because neither Carole King nor Gerry Goffin, who wrote that song, actually lived in an apartment built with a roof. It actually had a roof, but it wasn't a roof you could go on. And yet here they are imagining what it would be like to escape the city and to go on this roof and imagine, what the stars would look like and what it would feel like there on the roof. It's easy as can be.
And I think the third thing that makes her music both so wonderful but also lasting is that in many, many songs, she's the optimist. Even when you think of a song like It's Too Late, which is a pretty raw statement of a romantic breakup, she ends the song with, “there'll be good times again for me and you.” There's just this little bit of an uplift at the end of a lot of her songs. And I think that's consoling, especially when you compare her to her peers, and they're all amazing. But you think about Joni Mitchell and her songs are just amazing and gorgeous in their music. But not all of them are very uplifting. Even the ballads like Circle Game, for example, one of her most famous songs, it's about the loss of innocence. And James Taylor songs, a lot of them were really depressive because that's how he was in those years. And so I think that's part of what makes for Carole King's enduring appeal. The originality of her music, the feelings that she transmits. And also in many, not all, but in many of her songs that that just feeling like somehow even at the bleakest times, it's going to get better.

AT: I'm always curious because there are so many incredible women in history. What was it about her specifically that made you want to write an entire book about Carole King, especially because, as we've mentioned, she had a memoir. She has a whole Broadway musical about her life and her music. So what is it that captured your attention, held it, but also that you feel you're adding to her legacy with this book?

JE: Well, for one thing is there hasn't been a standalone biography of her. There's a fantastic book that came out about 20 years ago called *Girls Like Us*. And it was by Sheila Weller, kind of a group biography of Carole King, Joni Mitchell and Carly Simon, who all interacted in Laurel Canyon in the early ‘70s. And again, it's an amazing book, but it's limited by when it came out. And so I thought there was an opening there. I've been a fan since Tapestry was released in 1971. And then, frankly, the opportunity arose. I was approached by the Jewish Lives series asking me to suggest some subjects. She was first on my list. They liked it, wrote up a book proposal. Yale University Press liked it. And that's how it happened. It really is hard to kind of immerse yourself in someone else's life. And for years, it may be hardest on your partner who has to listen to this all. And then you're always worried, am I going to get it right? Am I too negative? Am I too positive? Am I ignoring some things, inevitably? The Jewish Lives biographies are really meant to be interpretive biographies, meaning that I was not obliged to write everything about Carole King from what's called cradle to grave biographies. I was really able to select what I thought were the most interesting and consequential parts of her life and not pay as much attention to other years, in fact, decades, where I don't think we would be talking about her in such a way if that were her only musical output. So these biographies tend not to be, we're instructed not to make them super long, which means that you have to think hard about compressing, what are you going to focus on? And there may be people who think I didn't focus on this enough or that enough. They may be right, but it was up to me to do it. So I like that freedom of being able to do that. And also, to be honest, I think more people are going to read my book till the end as opposed to it being 800 pages, not to say anything bad about those who publish 800-page biographies. I've read some myself, but I wanted this to be accessible.

AT: So other than being, let's say, a bit more concise and perhaps a bit more focused than a more extensive, in-depth look at her life might be, what do you hope that readers will get out of your book?

JW: The series is called Jewish Lives. So obviously, all the subjects are Jewish. She was born Carol Joan Klein, changed her name to King, just when she was leaving high school and starting to sell her music. But we

were really told, or at least I was told, not to accentuate her Jewishness. There's a certain kind of writing and I was involved in it as well when I edited The Forward where you write about anybody because their aunt's dentist once dated a Jew. That's not what this series, as I understand it, is about. So I didn't want to ignore her Jewish past, what consists of her Jewish identity, nor did I want to exaggerate it. So that was also pretty freeing. But what I do think is significant is that she, I think, represents a moment in time in American Jewish history. Postwar America saw a real spike in anti-Semitism. The war was blamed on the Jews. And then starting in the early ‘50s, it came down dramatically. And that was due to a lot of things: assimilation, legal challenges, all sorts of things. But by the time she's coming of age, she graduated high school class in 1958. She was living in a time where things are going to be more open to Jews, not that she didn't feel the pressure to change her last name. But still, she's clearly Jewish. You just have to take one look at her. And so that wasn't stopping her. And frankly, at the same time, also, things were just starting to open up for women. And that was very important, too. She was the first woman to do a lot of things, certainly the first mother. But things were starting to change, in part thanks to people like her who just, maybe not even aggressively, but just persistently push that door open.

But I thought what was happening in Brooklyn in the 1950s is fascinating. There was kind of a Jewish subculture there that was identifiably Jewish, but not religious. What we might call secular Jews or Jews of no religion, except that that doesn't quite explain what this is. Meaning you had very much of an awareness of who you are. You ate Jewish foods. You had a meal at Passover, maybe surely some at Rosh Hashanah. But you may not have gone to synagogue. You may not have been someone who observed Jewish rituals or studied Jewish texts. And there were a lot of Jews, including a lot of Jews in music, who kind of fit into this mold. Paul Simon, Barbra Streisand, all of them were her actual peers, and then lots of other people. And I just thought that was really interesting because they had this Jewish awareness and identity. It was not based on what we think about now among American Jews. It was something different. Israel is still very young, and people like Carole King really didn't think much about it. And the Holocaust was also still fresh and therefore not really discussed very much. And especially if you were a girl growing up in this culture. If you were a boy, at least your parents wanted you to become a bar mitzvah, and they belonged to the synagogue at least until the boy was 13. But in her case, her only sibling was a brother, but he was born highly impaired and could never have had a bar mitzvah or anything like that. And so it was different for her and her family. And that just interests me a lot. And I think it's a small part of American Jewish history that hasn't been explored enough.

AT: So if you're a Gentile, because obviously this book is not just for Jewish people or people interested in Jewish people, which sounds a bit odd as I say it. But apart from folks who may not be interested in the Jewish Lives series as a whole, what do you think that this book has for them?

JE: Oh gosh, I hope so much. I did not write it as a Jewish book. As I said, I didn't want to ignore her ties to the Jewish world. She had her son bar mitzvahed. There are some aspects of her like that. But for me, this book was written for the mom in middle America who always loved Carole King and took her teenage daughter to see a regional production of Beautiful. Maybe her husband tagged along. They suddenly thought, “oh my gosh, these are amazing songs. I want to learn more about this woman's life.” Everything from the words I used to not presuming that people know about certain things, I really tried to make it in language, in the way it was put together, very inclusive. Because I really believe that there is this incredible audience out there. I've been doing a lot of radio and podcast interviews, including yours. And what struck me is how many men are interviewing me gushing over her. Now, I thought most of the people who read this book are going to be Baby Boomer women like myself with curly hair and whatever. But it's been really interesting. I don't mean that they're just perfunctorily interviewing me. They really know her music. So, it just tells me that there is a very broad appeal out there. And I really hope I'm reaching it, because that's what I was trying to do with this book.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women Podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.